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ABSTRACT

Research has been done on the relationship between students' language learning strategies and test-taking strategies, but often such investigations have taken place after a time lapse. This project entailed asking students to evaluate and explain how they take reading comprehension examinations in a foreign language while they were actually taking the examination. Forty-five university students, native or proficient speakers of Hebrew in their first year of a two-year English as a second language (ESL) program, were given five subtests designed to test reading comprehension in English. After each subtest there were a series of questions in Hebrew designed to find out how students evaluate examination questions and test types and use test taking strategies. The five tests consisted of: open-ended questions, multiple choice, rhetorical devices, vocabulary, and a cloze test. In addition to the questions for evaluation of each subtest, there were 16 general evaluation questions. Analysis of the data revealed that most students preferred the open-ended questions and succeeded better on them. It also appeared that strategies students used taking the test were determined by the nature of the subtest. A copy of the test is attached. (AMH)

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HOW STUDENTS EVALUATE AND TAKE READING COMPREHENSION EXAMINATIONS IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

by MERLE A. ROIZEN

ABSTRACT

Forty-five subjects were tested in reading comprehension in English as a foreign language. Simultaneously the subjects were asked to evaluate and describe their approach to five subtests. All data were analysed and information concerning how students regard and take exams was obtained.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are several people whom I wish to thank for their collaboration on this project. First I express my gratitude to Ms. Jasmine Hirsch and Mr. Andre Levy for their help in translating the questions on strategies from English to Hebrew. Thanks are also due to Dr. Francis Hirsch for editing, as well as for assisting me with the compilation of the students' written answers. Finally many thanks go to Prof. Andrew Cohen for directing this project.

INTRODUCTION

To date, research has been done with student informants to find out about some of the strategies they use in language learning (Cohen and Aphek, 1981; Naiman, Frohlich and Stern, 1974; Laufer and Sim, 1981). Investigations have also been made to probe how students approach a testing situation (Larson, 1981; MacKay, 1974; Mehan, 1972). In both situations, learning and testing, the subjects have been questioned about their learning or test taking strategies either orally or via a written questionaire. Frequently such inquiries have taken place several hours or days after the learning or testing took place.

Because of such time lapses the subjects may have forgotten or dismissed pertinent information which would have been reported had they been questioned while engaged in the specific activity. This particular problem is avoided when the subjects are questioned orally at the time of the testing, however, since oral questioning lends itself to dialogue, the examiner may unintentionally influence his subjects' thinking, and likewise their answers.

This project entailed asking students to evaluate and to explain how they take reading comprehension examinations in a foreign language while they were actually doing so. Its purpose was to investigate the following:

1. How do students regard the conventional type of questions used to test reading comprehension ?
2. Does testing make students aware of their weak and strong points in the area of reading comprehension ?
3. What are some of the strategies students use when taking a test ?
4. Do students make use of the reading techniques taught them in class when taking an exam ?

SUBJECTS

This examination was administered to forty-five subjects. The great majority were students at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem who were studying in the first of a two year English program. A few of the students were studying at the Bezalel Art Institute of the same city. All concerned were at the same level of language proficiency in English and were using the same text book throughout the academic year. The subjects' native language was either Hebrew or Arabic. In the case of the latter those concerned were proficient in Hebrew and had passed their matriculation and university entrance examinations in

Hebrew. Consequently, English was either their second or third language.

METHOD

The examination was comprised of five subtests, all of which were designed to test reading comprehension in English. The text, entitled The Population Explosion, was taken from Reading for Adults- Book 3, by Lewis, McVincent and Weir. After each subtest there were a series of questions posed in Hebrew. They were designed to find out how students evaluate examination questions and subtests, and learn about some of their test taking strategies. The questions were asked in Hebrew because they were not meant to test reading comprehension in English and because they were to pose no difficulty. Each subtest was alotted a specific number of points. There were eighty-five in total. There was a time limit for the reading of the text, for each subtest, and for each group of questions posed in Hebrew. Although the entire exam was to have taken seventy-five minutes, this time limit was not enforced as the concern was more with having the students finish the exam than with their adhering to any time restrictions.

Subtest I consisted of five open-ended questions which required written answers. In Hebrew the students were asked which questions they found difficult, easy or unfair, as well as which questions they felt they had answered correctly or incorrectly and why.

On subtest II there were five multiple choice questions. The questions in Hebrew were disigned to compare the difficulty of the open-ended questions to that of the multiple choice questions, and to investigate if the subjects had guessed the answers in this section, and if so, why.

Subtest III was entitled Anaphora and Rhetorical Devices. Here the subjects were asked what specific words referred to, or what word or phrase could replace the language used in the text without changing its meaning. In Hebrew the students were asked to evaluate the difficulty of the items and to indicate if such items helped to better understand the text.

Subtest IV was on vocabulary. It required that the students supply five antonyms for words in the text. Though this exercise was relatively easy, the strategy questions proved interesting as they reflected how dependent the students were upon a dictionary.

Subtest V consisted of a composed cloze which was a summary of the entire text and included ten deletions. In Hebrew the students were asked if such an exercise appealed to them, if they found it difficult or easy, and if it helped them to understand the article.

Concerning their overall approach to the exam the students were asked another sixteen questions in Hebrew. For example, I wanted to know if they did the exam by first reading the text and then the questions, by reading the questions and then the text, or by reading paragraph by paragraph and looking for specific questions and answers. They were also asked which of the five subtests was the easiest and which the hardest, whether they liked or disliked answering the questions in Hebrew, and finally whether they cheated. The exam was taken anonymously and no grades were recorded.

PROCEDURES

The text was given in a normal examination setting. The instructions were read aloud and the students were allowed to use dictionaries, but they were not permitted to share them. When it became apparent that many students needed more than seventy-five minutes to complete the examination, they were granted more time. Since all of the subjects were accustomed to taking such tests in English and given that they were all proficient in Hebrew, there were no administrative difficulties.

DATA ANALYSIS

Mean scores and standard deviations for each of the five subtests were calculated using the SPSS "Frequencies" Program. This program also provided frequency counts for the evaluation and strategy questions posed in Hebrew (Nie et al, 1975). The Grader Program (1) gave reliability, item difficulty and item discrimination information for the test. The responses to the open-ended questions posed in Hebrew were content analysed.

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(1) This program is available from Dr. Earl Rand, ESL Section, Dpt. of English, University of California at Los Angeles, L.A. 90024.

FINDINGS

Out of the forty-five subjects who took the test, the majority reported that the multiple-choice questions were more difficult to answer than the open-ended ones. The students apraisal was corroborated by the findings that sixty-three percent of the open-ended items were answered correctly, while fifty-four percent of the multiple-choice items were successfully answered.

Regarding the first subtest, the following question was considered to be the most difficult.

How many reasons does the author give to explain the world food shortage ? (Write a number).....What are they ? ....

.....

.....

According to the students who answered, this was a difficult item because of the vocabulary and because one had to read and comprehend the entire text in order to succeed on it. Only forty-four percent of the students answered this question correctly. This was the lowest percentage on the open-ended questions. Likewise, seventy-eight percent of the students correctly answered the question which was identified as the easiest.

When asked to write the numbers of the questions they felt they answered correctly and incorrectly, the students better sensed when they made errors than when they did not; however, they were never very accurate. For example, on the open-ended questions seventy-three percent erred in estimating their correct answers and sixty-three percent erred in estimating their incorrect answers. The estimates for the multiple-choice questions were very similar.

Only fourteen percent of those who answered said there were unfair questions on the exam. Those who explained why said it was because no credit was given to partialy correct answers. (e.g. the open-ended question which is cited above as being the most difficult item on subtest I). Others claimed that the vocabulary used in the wording of questions was too difficult.

When asked if they guessed on multiple-choice questions, only twenty- three

percent of those who responded said "yes." Their reasons for guessing were that they simply did not have enough time for rereading and searching for the answer, or that they did not know the answer, hence they had no choice. Although seventy-seven percent said they did not guess, only one student explained why. This student claimed that guessing was useless as it did not improve comprehension. Fifty-five percent of those who answered said questions on anaphora and rhethorical devices helped them with overall comprehension of the text because these items emphasize difficult points, make the reader return to certain words and structures, and help to link sentences and ideas. The others said that this subtest was useless because its items focus on specific words and structures and not on the entire text. They also complained that looking for specific points distracts them from the entire context, although understanding the entire article is required for answering such questions. On the other hand, they claimed that if they understood the entire text, these items were a waste of time. Finally, several said that such a subtest only tests grammar and has nothing to do with reading comprehension. Many students also said that they found such questions very difficult because they had to know the exact synonyms of words from memory as they were unable to figure them out from the context, or that they had to recall the necessary parallel word in English even if they could decide on the answer in Hebrew.

The vocabulary section was reported to be the easiest and this was reflected in the results as eighty-one percent of the students succeeded on this subtest.

The answers to the strategy questions on this particular subtest revealed that although eighty-seven percent of the students said they answered the

vocabulary questions from context, they were not certain that this was a completely honest answer as many of the words were so familiar to them that they were able to answer from their own knowledge of English.

Although the subjects did well on vocabulary, seventy-five percent of them said that they could not have read the entire article without the use of a dictionary. Twenty-three percent of the subjects reported having to look up at least ten words and seven percent said they looked up as many as twenty words.

The least popular and least successful of the subtests was the Cloze. Only thirty-three percent answered it correctly. The reasons for not liking it were that it made them nervous, it required too much patience and concentration, it did not help with overall comprehension, it was merely a grammar exercise, and if one missed one word it was impossible to continue. The subjects also claimed that the cloze demands that a student have a large vocabulary and a good memory. In spite of this criticism, forty percent of those who responded said they benefited from the cloze as it nicely summarized the article, emphasized its main points, and required thinking and logic.

As for the strategy questions concerning the entire article, sixty percent of those who answered said they were familiar with the topic before taking the exam and seventy-two percent of those said that this knowledge of the topic was helpful in comprehending the text. Eighty-nine percent of the students reported that they followed instructions and read the entire text before answering the questions. The other eleven percent either read the questions before reading the article, read part of the article and looked for corresponding questions, or answered a few questions and then continued reading. Eighty-six percent of

those who replied said the time limit on the exam did not bother them, and of these seventy-two percent admitted paying no attention to the time. Twenty-five percent of the students who responded said that they were able to answer some of the questions without understanding the article. The reasons for success on items which did not require the reading of the passage were that the subjects were able to draw on their own knowledge of the topic and, in the case of the vocabulary, they simply knew the words. Eighty-three percent of those who answered said they did not cheat and those who did, did not explain how. Considering that the exams were anonymous and no grades were recorded, there was no obvious motivation for cheating. Slightly more than half of the students (Fifty-three percent) said that they enjoyed answering the evaluation and test taking strategy questions. The others claimed that such questions were bothersome and too time consuming.

DISCUSSION

Let us now go back to the original research questions and focus in on the answers they received. Concerning how students regard the conventional types of questions used to test reading comprehension, it appears that they prefered open-ended questions to multiple choice ones, found them easier and did better on them. While a small majority of the students claimed that questions on anaphora and rhetorical devices were helpful for overall comprehension, others found them distracting and bothersome. The vocabulary questions, at least on this exam, proved to be very easy; nevertheless, most students needed a dictionary to comprehend the text. The cloze was unpopular and the subjects did poorly on it.

Since students prefer open-ended questions and do better on them, one may

ask if it would not be wiser to use this type of item only to test reading comprehension. Multiple-choice items are difficult to compose and item analysis of these items often reveals that only one or two out of the three or four distractors are really effective. Another negative factor about multiple-choice items is the amount of time and effort students invest in reading incorrect answers. Considering the question of reliability, if the open-ended questions all have short answers which do not involve essay writing, and are graded by the same person or group of persons, the reliability factor should not be a major problem. Moreover, some students may produce unanticipated correct answers which reveal a very clever interpretation of a particular text and the corresponding questions.

Regarding the question, "Does testing make students aware of their weak and strong points in the area of reading comprehension?" one must consider the following: if the answer has to be determined from the students ability to predict which specific questions they answered correctly and incorrectly, the answer to this question would be "no." However the same subjects did the best on the subtests they classified as being the easiest and most helpful (i.e., open-ended questions, vocabulary, anaphora and rhetorical devices), and they did poorly on the unpopular subtests (cloze and multiple -choice). Therefore , they correctly sensed in which areas they were strongest and weakest.

The strategies students used taking this test were determined by the nature of the subtests. On open-ended questions most students copied their answers from the text rather than rephrasing them in their own words. Since the purpose of such an exam is to test reading comprehension and not writing ability, quoting from the text should perhaps be encouraged as it eliminates grammatical

errors and eliviates problems of realibility in correction. The only subtests which lent themselves to guessing were the cloze and the multiple-choice questions. The questions on anaphora and rhetorical devices fulfilled their functions as they obliged the person being tested to focus on specific points. Translation, as well as the overuse of dictionaries were seen as widespread, yet time consuming strategies which result in erroneous comprehension.

While most students found their own knowledge of the subject helpful in comprehending the text, there still were some items left unanswered on all of the subtests. This seems to reflect the nature of individual students more than that of the test. It is understandable that a slow reader may not finish an exam on time, that a person feeling sure he does not know an answer sees no reason to waste his time answering it, or that occasionaly people may be so hurried or confused that they actually overlook an item.

Although a great many students said they followed instructions and read the entire text before answering the questions as they do in a classroom situation, I am not certain they would have approached the exam in the same way, had it affected their class mark.

To sum up one may conclude that open-ended questions revealed to be the most effective, and that the nature of each single subtest widely determined the strategies used by the subjects.

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Appendix

A Copy of the examination and accompanying questions designed for student evaluation and for finding out about their test taking strategies.

INSTRUCTIONS:

Carefully read the entire text before answering the questions. The time you should spend on each set of questions and on the reading is indicated at the beginning of each section. The entire exam will last 75 minutes. If you have any questions, raise your hand. The teacher will come to you. Do not leave your seats.

Please answer the questions which are posed in Hebrew, as well as those in English.

You need not put your name on this exam. You will not receive a grade. However, you must return the exam to your instructor. You may use any dictionary of your choice, but you may not share dictionaries with each other.

Reading (15 minutes)

THE POPULATION EXPLOSION

Three babies born every second....

There are over 3,800 million people in the world today, and the total is increasing at the rate of more than 76 million a year. United Nations experts have calculated that it could be more than 7,000 million by the end of the century.

The population is growing more quickly in some parts of the world than others. The continents with the fastest growth rates are Latin America (2.9 per cent) and Africa (2.6 per cent). Asia comes third (21 per cent) but because its present population is so large it is there that by far the greatest number of people will be added before theend of the century.

What has caused the population explosion?

The main reason is not so much a rise in birth rates as a fall in death rates as a result of improvements in public health services and medical care. Many more babies now survive infancy, grow up and become parents, and many more adults are living into old age so that the populations are being added at both ends. In Europe and America the death rate began to fall during the Industrial Revolution. In the developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America the death rate began to fall much later and the birth rate has only recently begun to fall.

The problems facing the developing countries

"The rich get richer and the poor get babies..."

This sudden increase in the population of the developing countries has come at a difficult time. Even if their population had not grown so fast they would have been facing a desperate struggle to bring the standard of living of their people up to the point at which there was enough food, housing, education, medical care and employment for everyone to have a reasonable life. The poor countries are having to run faster and faster in their economic activity in order to stay in the same place, and the gap in wealth between rich and poor countries grows wider every year.

Too little food...

The most pressing problem created by the rapid increase in population is a shortage of food. More mouths have to be fed every year, and yet a high proportion of the existing population are not getting enough of the right kind of food. Over the past two years the total amount of food has decreased, and of course the total amount of food per person has decreased even more sharply.

Too many people

More and more of the babies born in developing countries have been surviving infancy and now nearly half the people living in those countries are under the age of 15. The adults have to work harder than ever to provide for the needs of the children, who cannot contribute to the economy until they are older. There is a shortage of schools and teachers, and there are not enough hospitals, doctors and nurses. Farming land is becoming scarce so country people are moving into the towns and cities in the hope of finding a better standard of living. But the cities have not been able to provide housing, and the newcomers live in crowded slums. Finally, there are too few jobs and unemployment leads to further poverty.

Section I - Comprehension Questions (open-ended) 10 minutes
35 points - there is no partial credit on these questions

1. line 20 - "much later" - Later than when? _____

2. lines 26-27 - " desperate struggle"

   a. What is the desperate struggle ? _____

   _____

   b. For whom is it a desperate struggle? _____

   _____

3. How many reasons does the author give to explain the world food shortage? (write a number) _____

   What are they? _____

   _____

4. Where are half the people under the age of 15? _____

   _____ Why is this so? _____

   _____

5. What two things have people been unable to find upon moving to cities? (answer with two words)

   a. _____ b. _____

   _____

The following questions were asked in Hebrew - 3 minutes

Circle your answers and/or answer briefly

1. Which of the 5 above questions was the most difficult?

   1 2 3 4 5

   Explain why- _____

2. Which of the 5 above questions was the easiest?

1 2 3 4 5

Explain why - _____

3. I answered the above questions

a. in ten minutes b. in less than 10 minutes

b. in more than 10 minutes d. I paid no attention to the time

4. Circle the number(s) of the question(s) which you are sure you answered correctly.

1 2 3 4 5

5. Circle the number(s) of the question(s) which you think you answered incorrectly.

1 2 3 4 5

6. Do you think any of the above questions were unfair?

a. yes b. no

If your answer is yes, which question(s) was/were unfair and why?

_____

SectionII - Multiple Choice Questions -(7 minutes - 15 points-)

6. By the end of the century, the continent which will have the most people is

a. Latin America b. Africa c. Asia d. North America

7. line 13 - "the main reason" is the reason for

a. increase in birth rate b. fall in death rate

c. general population explosion d. people living to old age

8. Lines 30-31 "The poor countries are having to run faster and faster in their economic activity to stay in the same place" because

a. their populations aren't increasing nor are their economies improving

b. their populations are increasing but their economies aren't improving

c. their populations aren't increasing but their economies are improving

d. both their populations and economies are remaining the same

9. One of the reasons for a world food shortage is

a. people eat more now than in the past

b. less food is produced now than in the past

c. the right kind of food is not being produced

d. more food isn't feeding more mouths

10. People are leaving farms in hopes of finding ------- in the cities.

a. land and hospitals b. education and homes

c. teachers and poverty d. hospitals and unemployment

(4)

The following questions were posed in Hebrew - 4 minutes
Circle your answer(s) to the following questions and/or answer briefly.

1. I answered questions numbers 6 - 10
   a. in 7 minutes b. in less than 7minutes
   c. in more than 7 minutes d. I paid no attention to the time
2. Circle the number(s) of the question(s) which was/were the most difficult.
   6 7 8 9 10 Explain-_____
3. Circle the number(s) of the question(s) which was/were the easiest.
   6 7 8 9 10 Explain-_____
4. Circle the number(s) of the questions which you are sure you answered correctly.
   6 7 8 9 10
5. Circle the number(s) of the question(s) which you feel you answered incorrectly.
   6 7 8 9 10
6. Which group of questions, the open-ended ones or the multiple choice ones, was the more difficult?
   a. open-ended questions b. multiple choice questions
7. Did you quess at the answers to any of the multiple choice questions?
   a. yes b. no
   If you answered yes, explain why- _____

Section III - Anaphora and Rhetorical Devices - (5 minutes - 10 points)

11. line 4 - "it" refers to _____
12. line 17 - "both ends" refer to _____
13. line 9 - the word <u>because</u> could be replaced by the word _____
14. line 45 - the word <u>ever</u> could be replaced by the word _____
15. line 49 - the word <u>so</u> could be replaced by the word _____

The following questions were posed in Hebrew - 3 minutes

1. Circle the number(s) of the question(s) which was/were the most difficult.
   11 12 13 14 15 Explain- _____
2. Circle the number(s) of the question(s) which was/were the easiest.
   11 12 13 14 15
   Explain - _____
3. Do you think questions of this type (Anaphora and Rhetorical Device) help you to understnad the text?
   a. yes b. no Why-_____

4. Which of the above questions are you sure you answered correctly? (Circle the number(s) of question(s).

11 12 13 14 15

5. Which of the above questions do you feel you answered incorrectly?

11 12 13 14 15

Why? _____

Section IV - Vocabulary - (4 minutes)(5 points)

In the blank write the antonym of each word written below. The answers are found in the text. (Example: big - small)

16. line 13 - rise - _____
17. line 13 - birth - _____
18. line 15 - infancy - _____
19. line 32 - rich - _____
20. line 35 - increase - _____

The following questions were asked in Hebrew - (5 minutes)

1. How would you classify questions 16 - 20?

   a. easy b. average difficulty c. difficult

2. To how many of the questions numbered 16 - 20 did you know the answers before you read the article?

   a. 0 b. 1 c. 2 d. 3 e. 4 f. all of them

3. Were you able to figure out the meaning of any word(s) from the context of the article?

   a. yes b. no If yes, which word(s) _____

4. Did you have to look up some of the words asked for in questions 16 -20 in the dictionary?

   a. yes b. no If yes, which words? _____

5. Did you need a dictionary to read the entire article?

   a. yes b. no

6. If you used a dictionary, approximately how many words did you look up? (write a number) _____

7. Write the 5 words you found to be most difficult.

_____ _____ _____ _____ _____

Section V- Composed Cloze (10 minutes)(20 points)

Questions 26 - 30 - The following paragraph consists of a summary of the article. Fill in each blank with a word (one only) which is grammatically correct and appropriate in meaning.

According to this short article the _____ is undergoing a population explosion. The _____gives several reasons to explain this. _____the birth rate is increasing and _____ infants are surviving, there are more _____ than ever before. Also the death _____ is decreasing and there are more _____

(6)

people than in the past. In _____ to this there is a world _____of food and ofcourse the developing _____ poor countries suffer the most.

The following questions were posed in Hebrew (3 minutes)

Circle your answers to the following questions and/or answer briefly.

1. How would you classify questions 21 -30 (the cloze)?
   a. easy b. average difficulty c. difficult
2. Do you enjoy doing a cloze exercise a. yes b. no
   Explain: _____
3. I did the cloze exercise by
   a. I first read the paragraph and then returned to fill in the blanks.
   b. I read the paragraph and filled in the blanks as I went along.
   c. I read sentence by sentence, filled in blanks where I was sure of the answers and left the others blank.
   d. I read the paragraph sentence by sentence, filled in what I was sure of and guessed at the rest.
   e. Other method - Explain: _____

Questions on the Overall Approach to the Exam - These questions were posed in Hebrew (6 minutes)

1. Did you know anything about the subject, The Population Explosion, before you read the article? a. yes b. no
   If so, did your own knowledge help you to understand the article? a. yes b. no
2. Did you follow the instructions given at the beginning of the exam? a. yes b. no
3. Did you read the entire article before answering the questions?
   a. yes b. no
4. Did you read the questions before reading the article?
   a. yes b. no
5. Did you read part of the article and then do the corresponding questions? a. yes b. no
6. Did you read part of the questions, look for the answers in the article and then continue in this fashion?
   a. yes b. no
7. Which sub-test was the most difficult?
   a. I - open-ended questions b. II- multiple choice questions
   c. III- Anaphora and Rhetorical Devices
   d. IV- Vocabulary e. V- Cloze

(3)

8. Which sub-test was the easiest?

   a. I - open-ended questions b. II- multiple choice questions

   c. III - Anaphora and Rhetorical Devices

   d. IV- Vocabulary e. V- Cloze

9. Did you pay attention to the time limits allowed for each sub-test and the questions in Hebrew?

   a. yes b. no

10. Did having time limits for the sub-tests bother you?

    a. yes b. no

11. Did you have enough time to finish the exam?

    a. yes b. no

12. Were you able to answer any of the questions without understanding the article?

    a. yes b. no

    If yes, Explain: _____

13. Did you cheat on any of the questions?

    a. yes b. no

    If yes, did you

    a. copy from a friend

    b. talk to someone

    c. send and receive a note

    d. other - explain: _____

14. Circle the letter of the statement which applies to you.

    a. I enjoyed answering the questions posed in Hebrew

    b. The questions posed in Hebrew bothered me in the midst of an English exam.